

# The culture argument regarding plagiarism and how it does not apply to Japan

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Numerous scholars suggest that the concept of word ownership is confined mostly to the West, and that people in other regions, particularly those in Asia, do not view plagiarism negatively. Concerning Japan, a supposed reverence for authority plays a major role in the so-called Japanese acceptance of plagiarism. However, the argument that Japan tolerates plagiarism is flawed. Certainly, it is important for Western educators to be aware of the cultural identities of their Japanese students, but it is incorrect to assume that plagiarism is not considered a moral problem in the country. In this paper, the author explores the basis behind the culture argument. Additionally, by examining the results of various surveys regarding plagiarism conducted at Japanese universities, the author demonstrates that the culture argument is flawed and that plagiarism is very much an issue of concern in Japan's academic world.

## 1 Introduction

There has been much discussion in recent years regarding the manner in which plagiarism is viewed in different cultures. Many scholars argue that word ownership is a concept confined mostly to the West.<sup>1-3</sup> (By “West,” scholars appear to be referring to countries in which English is spoken as a native language. “West” is probably not the most ideal term to use, especially because it seemingly includes countries such as Australia and New Zealand, but for the sake of simplicity, it will be used in this manner accordingly for this study.) As such, they insist that abhorrence to plagiarism exists only in the said West, and that culturally, it is not considered nearly as negatively elsewhere. According to proponents of this culture argument, those involved in teaching English to non-native speakers, especially those from Asia, must therefore be cautious when discovering instances of plagiarism in the works of their students, because they likely come from societies that do not regard plagiarism as something to be avoided at all costs and instead view it as acceptable, and even something to be encouraged. As an educator living and teaching in

Japan, I have also heard on numerous occasions the claim that plagiarism is an accepted practice in the country. Interestingly enough, however, those espousing this view have without fail been other native English speaking instructors, rather than the Japanese themselves. In fact, when consulting with Japanese professors regarding the matter, not even one was even aware of the existence of the culture argument.

Liu has provided a rebuttal against the culture argument and how it applies to China.<sup>4</sup> I would assert that plagiarism is not considered an acceptable practice in Japan either. That plagiarism occurs in Japan is indisputable. What is far less certain, however, is the role culture plays in this. It is questionable as to whether plagiarism is as culturally linked to Far Eastern countries such as Japan as many would have us believe. In fact, the culture argument – that plagiarism is somehow viewed differently, and not entirely unfavorably, in Japan – is dubious at best.

## 2 Comparing plagiarism East and West

As mentioned previously, there is no questioning that plagiarism occurs in Asia. What is questionable,

however, is whether it occurs more frequently than in the West. A number of reports indicate that plagiarism appears to be a problem in countries in which the act is supposedly not tolerated. In England, for example, a 2010 study indicated that half of the students at three British universities expressed a willingness to purchase online essays.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, a 2006 study showed that 37% of Canadian undergraduates (n=13,644) admitted to having copied sentences from internet sources without citation when writing their own papers.<sup>6</sup> Yet another survey, a sweeping 2005 report, showed that up to half of the over 63,000 undergraduate students from American and Canadian universities that participated in the study admitted to plagiarism.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, plagiarism is by no means confined to Asia.

There have been few comparative studies that focus on the manner in which plagiarism is viewed in Japan and Western countries. One, in 2005, had professors Kobayashi and Rinnert conducting surveys comparing attitudes toward plagiarism and citation techniques between American and Japanese university students.<sup>8</sup> One of the questions in the surveys (which were in English for the American students and Japanese for the Japanese students) asked students to express their opinions of plagiarism. Results indicated that 56% of the Japanese students voiced some tolerance of the practice; only 5% of the American students showed any kind of conditional acceptance.

The report is interesting and the authors do not themselves conclude that plagiarism is accepted in Japan; rather, they list a number of reasons why it may occur, among them a student lack of knowledge of citation techniques. However, when considering the results of the question on their surveys described above, regarding attitudes toward plagiarism, it is important to note that the terms used to denote “plagiarism” in the English and Japanese versions of the questionnaires differed. For the English version, the authors used the term “plagiarism” which, of course, has a very negative connotation. In Japanese, the term most commonly used for plagiarism is “*tousaku*,” which can be translated as “stolen work.” However, the term the authors chose to use for the Japanese version of the questionnaires was “*ukeuri*.” Defined loosely by the authors as “second-hand account” or “echo of someone else's words,” its connotation is significantly less harsh than either

“*tousaku*” or “plagiarism.” It is difficult to imagine that this did not impact students’ answers (which the authors themselves acknowledge).

### 3 Applying the culture argument to Japan

#### *A good example?*

Liu writes that much of the argument that plagiarism is acceptable in Asia (and therefore Japan) stems from anecdotes in which ESOL students, having been found to plagiarize, express puzzlement over being accused of wrongdoing.<sup>4</sup> One such example can be found in Sowden,<sup>9</sup> who refers to an incident from Pecori.<sup>10</sup> A group of Japanese students, when asked why they had not cited an author whose arguments they had utilized, defended themselves by claiming that because the author was correct, his views were now common knowledge, and there was no need to acknowledge him. Sowden attributes this to prevailing Confucian beliefs in Japan, the “idea of the communal ownership of knowledge,” which “contradict[s] established notions of plagiarism in the West,” and evidence of Japanese acceptance of plagiarism.<sup>9</sup> That is one possibility, perhaps. However, rather than interpret this incident as a blithe acceptance of plagiarism by the Japanese students, it may just as easily be viewed as an example of the students misinterpreting what should be considered common knowledge, an issue that is often problematic for Western students as well.

#### *The role of authority*

It is not surprising that Sowden would mention Confucian ideals when suggesting plagiarism is accepted in Japan. The role of authority, including Confucian beliefs – showing respect to those in authority – are often cited as reasons for plagiarism in the country. Sowden, for example, reiterates Dorji's assertion that the Japanese “learn from an early age to always consider themselves in relation to the group as a whole for, what are, essentially, Confucian ideals of hierarchy.”<sup>11</sup> According to Sowden, this manner of thought is also true in the academic world, and contrasts to the West, “where individual effort and self-reliance are considered meritorious, and mutual assistance is not encouraged outside strict boundaries.”<sup>9</sup>

Dryden, who has taught in a Japanese university, is another scholar who argues that plagiarism is acceptable in Japan, suggesting this is because “the

Confucian patterns of social and educational institutions established nearly four hundred years ago have persisted into contemporary times.”<sup>12</sup> That the belief Confucianism actually plays an important role in daily Japanese society is questionable at best is seemingly irrelevant in matters concerning plagiarism in Japan.

Not only Confucian values, but also Buddhist beliefs, supposedly contribute to a culture in Japan in which plagiarism is tolerated. Sowden refers to an incident from Ballard, in which a Japanese student at an Australian university seemingly becomes confused when his lecturer expects him – a mere student – to offer an opinion on a subject.<sup>13</sup> Ballard does not find this surprising:

In some Buddhist societies, where respect for the teacher is a duty which follows those of respect for the Buddha, the Law and the monks, the dynamics of the classroom are shaped by the impossibility of questioning, much less contradicting, the teacher. In Japan the subordinate role of the student overrides any attempt to develop independent or individual views.<sup>13</sup>

From this example, Sowden suggests that from the Japanese perspective, students do not believe they have the rights to opinions. Rather, it is the teacher's responsibility to provide the answers. As a result, Sowden concludes, “from this perspective, plagiarism can be seen as a virtue: producing what you know to be correct.”<sup>9</sup>

In addition, Dryden believes that Japanese society is a hierarchy, composed of numerous *sempai* (senior) — *kohai* (subordinate) relations, and those who are in the subordinate position do not yet have the right to opinions.<sup>12</sup> For good measure, Dryden also posits that Japan is very much a group society, and the Japanese are therefore unfamiliar with the concept of individual ownership. As such, he queries, how can plagiarism exist when ideas belong to a group rather than individuals? He sums up his general argument as follows:

Plagiarism does not make much sense to the Japanese as a moral issue. They have been educated to think of morality in ways that are fundamentally different from the common Western view: that is, it

is proper to mistrust or discount one's own opinions; it is good and virtuous to study, memorize, and imitate proper models; and it is necessary to defer one's own judgments to the consensus of the group. Given such views of learning and morality . . . the tendency to copy freely from published sources seems only natural.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4 The case against the culture argument

There are numerous reasons to take issue with the culture argument. Just by its nature, it comes off as somewhat condescending, as if those who espouse it can claim that “Asian” culture is so simple that it can be explained in merely a few sentences. Buranen warns of this, and claims that the next step is the assertion that while Westerners can easily comprehend Asian culture, the reverse is not true.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, although the culture argument may be well-intentioned, Leask criticizes it as one that singles out, in patronizing fashion, Asian learners: “When we talk of plagiarism and international students, and in particular ‘Asian’ students, when we construct the stereotypical Asian learner as deficient and therefore more likely to plagiarise than domestic (Western) students, we construct Asian students as cultural ‘Others’ and the discourse of plagiarism becomes the discourse of Orientalism.”<sup>15</sup> Viewed in this manner, rather than promoting a greater understanding between cultures, the argument further divides between “Us” (Western educators) and “Them” (international, and usually, Asian students).

It also appears to be another instance in which Asian (in this case, Japanese) students find themselves under a virtual microscope, with their actions continuously being interpreted as part of their culture. As Baumann notes, seemingly every move an Asian student makes is “interpreted with stunning regularity as a consequence of their ‘Asianness’, their ‘ethnic identity’, or the ‘culture’ or their ‘community.’”<sup>16</sup> We can see an example of this in the case cited above of the students who did not cite the author whose work they utilized. Sowden attributes their failure to do so as evidence of Confucian influences, rather than considering the possibility that it may have been a misinterpretation of the rules of “common knowledge.”

Furthermore, implicit in the argument is the belief that plagiarism must be so widespread in Asian

countries that there is a necessity to explore the reasons why it occurs so often. As described earlier, however, plagiarism is common practice in the West. Nevertheless, one will find very few scholars arguing that plagiarism is culturally acceptable in that region. In a sense, then, it may be possible to conclude that the culture argument not only demeans Asian students, but effectively portrays Western students in a bad light as well. After all, although ostensibly Asian students can be “excused” (albeit patronizingly) for their tendency to copy without citation, plagiarism is portrayed as a moral offense in the West but students do so regardless, knowing full well that what they are doing is considered wrong. This is certainly not the most flattering depiction of Western students.

Finally, there is little evidence that plagiarism is considered an acceptable practice in Japan. Even Dryden's own students seemingly disagree with his conclusions. Results of a survey participated by nearly 200 students at his university indicated the students' belief that “copying a source without attribution was considered ‘improper’ and ‘not conducive to a good education.’”<sup>12</sup> Oddly, Dryden brushes these results aside, expressing doubts about the legitimacy of students' comments, suggesting that they may have simply answered in a manner that they believed was expected of them. He does not explain how the survey was conducted, nor does he elaborate about why he believes students would hold such beliefs.

### 5 Japanese students' attitudes regarding plagiarism

A study undertaken by Wheeler at Hokkaido University indicates that Japanese misgivings about plagiarism are similar to those in the West.<sup>17</sup> The survey was designed to explore student attitudes toward plagiarism. In one section of the survey, conducted with 77 students from four English writing classes, students read and assigned a score of one to ten points (ten being the highest score possible) to a paragraph purportedly submitted by a student as a written homework assignment. In actuality, the passage was written by Wheeler. Following this, students were asked to read what they were informed was a passage (also penned by Wheeler) that had been previously published in an academic journal, which was almost exactly the same as the first piece they read. Students were then asked to re-evaluate the first

paragraph.

Results of this survey were interesting: the initial mean score for the student passage was 7.29, which on a general Japanese university grading scale is considered good. However, the re-evaluated mean score, after students read the published passage, plummeted to 3.58, which is considered a failing grade. 44% of the students gave the lowest score possible, or lower. (Eight students apparently thought one point was not low enough and gave scores of zero.) Moreover, nearly 60% of the students wrote comments criticizing the fictitious student severely for plagiarizing the published piece.

Students also read and evaluated a third passage, again “student” written, which was similar in content to the published passage. However, although the ideas presented were similar, the vocabulary utilized was mostly different, making it a somewhat less obvious piece of plagiarism. The overall mean score for this paragraph was 5.12, higher than the re-evaluated first passage, but still a failing grade according to most Japanese university standards. The overall view from students, according to their comments, was that although the student's plagiarism in this instance was not as severe as that of the first author, in that he mostly used his own words, it was still morally unacceptable.

### 6 Japanese professors' attitudes toward plagiarism

Since the role of authority apparently is crucial in Japanese acceptance of plagiarism, it may be worthwhile to explore two recent surveys conducted among Japanese professors that explore this issue. Norris, a professor at a Japanese university, conducted a survey that examined professors' thoughts regarding plagiarism in the university.<sup>18</sup> As part of the survey, participants were asked whether they had encountered instances of plagiarism in their classes, and if so, how they had dealt with such. Among the 20 participants, 17 replied that such instances had occurred. This result should not be entirely surprising; no one will argue that plagiarism does not occur in Japan. However, that 85% of the participants confirmed past instances of plagiarism may be an indication that professors are on the lookout for it, not what one would expect if plagiarism were truly blithely accepted in Japan. Moreover, of the 17 professors who



discovered plagiarism in their classes,<sup>15</sup> reprimanded the guilty students and made them rewrite the assignment, and in the other two cases, the students either failed the assignment or received a lower grade. These results cast doubt on the culture argument, much of which rests on the theory that plagiarism occurs because students are emulating those in authority, who, in turn, are seemingly encouraging them to plagiarize, and suggest this conclusion is not entirely accurate.

To determine what the professors at sapporo medical University felt about the culture argument concerning plagiarism, and how it related to Japan, in 2010 I also conducted a simple survey. Staff at Sapporo Medical University's Center for Medical Education (mostly consisting of professors from the liberal arts and sciences), as well as the School of Medicine, School of Health Sciences and the university hospital were asked to read and express their opinion of the passage quoted earlier from Dryden, which was translated into Japanese. (Please see Appendix.)<sup>43</sup> professors participated in the survey, which was conducted entirely in Japanese (although one participant replied in English). In an attempt to avoid potential bias (there is occasionally a tendency for some to read commentary on their own culture and be skeptical of conclusions reached if they know that the author is of a different nationality) information concerning Dryden, the author of the passage, was withheld until after participants had completed the survey. Participation was anonymous, although professors had the option of including their names if they wished. (Interestingly, one professor expressed a strong desire that his or her name be mentioned.)

Responses indicated overwhelmingly that participants found the culture argument unconvincing, with two bluntly dismissing the conclusions in the passage as “nonsense.” The participants touched on what they felt were numerous flaws in the conclusions reached by Dryden, with remarks mostly falling under the often overlapping categories below. (Comments have been translated into English by the author, and no participant has been quoted more than once.)

#### *Plagiarism occurs outside of Japan*

Participants concluded from the passage that the author was assuming that plagiarism was more rampant in Japan than in other regions, and summarily

rejected this belief, countering that plagiarism was a worldwide problem, and condemned in Japan just as elsewhere. One participant, dismissing the passage as “extremely one-sided and prejudiced,” argued that “plagiarism is the work of those lacking originality or extensive knowledge. Those kinds of people exist everywhere in the world, irrespective of culture. As such, plagiarism is a problem everywhere in the world, including the West.” Another wrote, “Because memorizing appropriate models and creating works based on such happens in all parts of the world, I think it is not a cultural condition peculiar to Japan. For that reason, I think one cannot say definitively that Japanese awareness of plagiarism as a moral issue is low.” Summing up the arguments from the many who declared that plagiarism was by no means unique to Japan, another participant wrote, “Plagiarism is not limited to the Japanese; people from other countries plagiarize as well. As such, the background behind plagiarism in many cases depends on individuals’ moral fortitudes.”

#### *Plagiarism is a moral issue*

Perhaps the biggest point of contention amongst the participants was Dryden's conclusion that plagiarism was not considered a moral issue in Japan. The vast majority expressed disagreement of this belief in their comments. “Plagiarism is morally unforgiveable,” one wrote, with another adding, “I think plagiarism is a big moral problem.” Moreover, it is common knowledge in Japan that plagiarism is wrong, according to another participant: “In present day Japan, it is widely recognized that plagiarism is a major violation of the rules.” Echoing this, one participant wrote, “I completely disagree with [the passage]. In Japan, moral education begins from elementary school, and it is common knowledge that plagiarism is a crime.” One participant expressed confusion over Dryden's conclusion that the supposed Japanese proclivity for memorization would lead one to conclude that plagiarism was thus considered acceptable: “‘It is good and virtuous to study and imitate proper models’ is a base by which learning takes place, and is thus not problematic, but the act of plagiarism is a clear moral problem; there is no direct connection between the two ideas. Therefore, to conclude that, ‘Given such views of learning and morality . . . the tendency to copy freely from

published sources seems only natural' is highly dubious."

*Difference in culture does not equate to acceptance of plagiarism*

Several participants acknowledged that there may be cultural differences between Japan and the West. However, they felt it a mistake to conclude from this that the Japanese found plagiarism morally acceptable. According to one, "Certainly there are instances of Japanese being insensitive about plagiarism, and this is a culturally traditional problem. However, Western thought and traditions have been incorporated into Japanese education and culture for over a hundred years already. We should not put too much emphasis on Japanese traditions." Another wrote, "If we look at that matter historically and culturally, certainly Japanese have imitated the good and superior aspects of foreign people and countries. However, this does not mean we unequivocally believe 'copying' is good. . . . Reaching the conclusion that because there is comparatively less resistance to copying in Japan, 'copy[ing] freely from published sources seems only natural' is simplistic." According to one participant, "It is unfortunate, but present day Japan is a society in which those who act individually are obstructed. However, that is not to say that all values deny the self and individuality, and believe to copy is good. In the various fields, [students] are not being educated to praise plagiarism." Finally, another wrote, "Although I agree with the author's belief that there are differences between Japanese and Western cultures, by looking at unbiased data, I do not agree that it is a fact that when compared to Westerners, Japanese have more instances of plagiarism. . . . Although it may be interesting to theorize about culture being a main cause of plagiarism, I feel there is little ground on which to support this."

*Simplistic cultural overgeneralizations*

Participants took issue with what they felt were trite stereotypes of Japanese society. According to one, "Japanese are each their own person. While I cannot deny there may be those who hold the mentality as described [in the passage], in this international society, in the present era in which papers are written in English, it's ludicrous to copy material." Another wrote, "I don't understand how one can put a label on

'Japanese.' In other words, there are different ways of thinking according to each individual person." Still another participant opined, "This document judgmentally describes Japanese morals, but not all Japanese view plagiarism or copying as a good thing." Finally, one participant wrote, "The author gives an idea that the problem of plagiarism is the result of Japanese culture, especially for the habit how to assert personal opinion. But I think that this is a misunderstanding of [the] author, because it is nonsense that this problem links to the Japanese [non-assertiveness]."

*Perhaps partly accurate, but unfortunately so*

Among the participants, very few were even remotely in agreement with the conclusion that plagiarism was considered morally acceptable in Japan. One suggested that plagiarism may be a trait peculiar to all Asians, and cited examples from Japan's history in which it copied ideas from other countries. The participant added, however, that this was completely different from the "present era of copy and paste." Another participant, rather than insisting the West be more sympathetic of Japanese values, was critical of the Japanese education system, suggesting that it allowed plagiarism to flourish. This participant had especially harsh words to say about university journals, in which submissions "that are merely examples of jargon dashed off, and fall far short of being evidence-based, are designated as academic papers, and considered valid." Another participant expressed concern not so much with the idea that plagiarism is morally acceptable in Japan, but rather the idea that it was thought to be: "I think the Japanese should have a more global viewpoint. Plagiarism is something that should absolutely be avoided. It is problematic that it is believed that education about what constitutes plagiarism in Japan lags behind."

## 7 Conclusion

There are, of course, limits to the survey conducted at the university. A greater number of participants would certainly have added validity to whatever conclusions could be reached. Additionally, although the wording of the survey was purposely kept as neutral as possible, merely asking participants to express their opinions, it may have been helpful to have another

question specifically asking whether they agreed or disagreed with the conclusions presented in the passage. Fortunately, there was little vagueness on the part of the participants, making interpreting their opinions a simple task.

Despite the limitations of the survey, it is striking that not one participant expressed an opinion that plagiarism actually should be tolerated or even forgiven in Japan. The overall tone of the participants – plagiarism is morally wrong – is similar to that in the past surveys by Wheeler and Norris.<sup>17, 18</sup>

It is important to be wary of the culture argument when we look for reasons why some Japanese students plagiarize. It is, of course, commendable and necessary for instructors to be aware of the backgrounds of their students, and this is particularly important for those involved in TESL/TEFL courses. However, creating cultural differences that do not actually exist is of benefit to no one. There is little evidence that suggests plagiarism is inherent in Japanese culture. On the contrary, it is more appropriate to conclude that it is considered just as morally unacceptable in Japan as it is in the West. Many Japanese students are certainly guilty of plagiarism. However, in exploring the reasons as to why this occurs, “culture” is best left out of the discussion.

### Appendix: Survey instructions and passage

剽窃（盗作）に対して日本人の考え方を説明している以下の文章を読み、これについてのあなたの意見を日本語で回答欄に書いて下さい。

日本人にとって、剽窃を倫理的な問題として考えることはあまり意味がない。日本人は一般的な西洋的な考え方と根本的に異なる方法で、考えるように教育されている。つまり、自分の意見を信用しない、又は大事にしないのは普通である；適当な模範について勉強したり、暗記したり、真似したりするのは良いことだ；自分の意見を全体の一一致した意見に従う必要がある。そういう学識と倫理観があるとすれば... 出版された題材を自由にコピーする傾向は極めて当たり前である。

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